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Masculinity and femininity as categories and constructs present in everyday life

An introduction

The subject of this monograph relates to stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Its aim is an attempt to describe the phenomena of masculinity and femininity and the role they can play in selected contexts of everyday life. Both masculinity and femininity are important biological, social and cultural categories and constructs. They possess an individual and collective meaning. In a self-perception process, women and men describe and define themselves in a context of femininity and masculinity. Women desire to perceive themselves as “feminine”, and men as “masculine”.

Moreover, people perceive others in the context of femininity and masculinity. Parents and teachers, partners and spouses, superiors and subordinates, all of them want to see girls and women as “feminine” and boys and men as “masculine”. Metaphorically speaking, according to Sandra Bem, in mutual perception of ourselves and surrounding world, both men and women put on “gender lenses”. In fact, the entire biological, psychological and socio-cultural reality is saturated with gender element. Humans, as well as most of living organisms, possess sex. Gender manifests itself in each person as an important dimension of the one’s own identity — as a subjective belief about their own femininity and masculinity.

Femininity and masculinity as important categories are present in our everyday life. In our language and social cognition we use pseudo-gender categories not only for humans but also for things. Chocolates and sweets are “feminine”, steak and pork hock are “masculine”, vodka is “masculine” as well, whereas liqueurs are “feminine”. Handbags are “feminine”, and machine guns are “masculine”. Activities which we perform are also marked by gender reference. Baby-sitting is per-

ceived as “feminine”, warfare as “masculine”. Private sphere (family and home) is “feminine”, but public sphere (career and politics) is “masculine”. Possessing power is perceived as more attributed to men, whereas being under somebody’s authority appears to be more attributed to women.

Finally, all the Nature as biological phenomenon is “feminine”, and the Culture, as the result of mankind’s actions and work, is “masculine”. Femininity is perceived as more biological, as it is strictly connected with giving life, while masculinity is perceived as changing, subduing and mastering the nature.

Femininity and masculinity function in the social life as defined patterns, ideal images of what women and men are and should be, as orders of the assigned behaviours, and finally, as beliefs about their social roles and mutual relations. They create stereotypes of femininity and masculinity and consist of beliefs about appearance, so also about physical attractiveness of women and men. They determine how women and men should look like, what tone of voice they should have, how they should move and dress, etc. They comprise components connected with physical traits, social roles and professions.

Femininity and masculinity are also social constructs. People create set of beliefs about what is feminine and what is masculine. They are usually in accordance with one another, but also negotiable to some extent. Nevertheless, beliefs about masculinity and femininity are characterized by stability, high consensus and high cultural universality over the years. At the same time we can notice that they are socially and culturally diversified. Nowadays, concepts of masculinity and femininity are changing. In some groups and societies these changes take place relatively quickly, and in others very slowly. In our times, in Poland it is hard to estimate the scope of occurring changes. But, many signs still suggest that traditional beliefs about masculinity and femininity more often than not prevail.

The present monograph, written by nine authors, deals with selected aspects of manifestations of masculinity and femininity in everyday life. In Chapter One by Eugenia Mandal, Agnieszka Gawor and Jacek Buczny, theoretical considerations and the results of their own research about content and factor structure of stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Poland are presented. The authors analyse stereotypical beliefs dealing with the following components of gender: physical appearance, social roles and occupations. They compare stereotypical beliefs about their own and the opposite gender revealed by women and men. The authors indicate similarities and differences in the

image of masculinity and femininity stereotypes gained in the present study conducted in Poland and in the research conducted in the USA in the 1980s.

In Chapter Two, Małgorzata Szarzyńska and Paul Toro focused on the social genesis of masculinity stereotypes and the process of socialization of contemporary men. The model of male sex role socialization process introduced by James O'Neil as well as the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS) (O'NEIL et al., 1986) are presented. The authors discuss conflicts dealing with the present-day socialization of men, and a traditional sex role orientation and Masculine Mystique. Negative consequences of contemporary men socialization relating to substance abuse, anxiety, depression and life satisfaction are presented.

In Chapter Three by Eugenia Mandal, masculinity and femininity are examined in the context of close relationships. The author focuses on the phenomenon of power in marriage and presents her own researches dealing with different kinds of power possessed by women and men in marriage. The author distinguishes the power based on the financial resources, more often possessed by men, and the power based on physical attractiveness, more often possessed by women. The type of possessed power, sex and gender (femininity and masculinity) can affect the preferred influence strategies used in marriage.

The category of masculinity described in the context of domestic violence is the topic of Chapter Four by Danuta Rode. The author presented the results of her original research on the large group of male perpetrators of domestic violence in Poland. The in-depth characteristics from the point of view of: self-esteem, self-control, temperament, habits of interpersonal reactions, etc., is presented. Physical and mental health conditions as well as family socialization process, social functioning and professional status are analysed. The author also distinguishes several types of men, perpetrators of domestic violence: aggressive-reactive, mildly aggressive-reactive, hostile with low reactivity, and low aggressive with moderate reactivity. Components of the stereotype of masculinity, such as aggressiveness and direct strategies of coping, play an important part in an image of domestic violence.

In Chapter Five, Eugenia Mandal and Karolina Zalewska consider the stereotype of femininity in the context of women's mental health. They demonstrate their own researches carried out on the group of women with a record of suicide attempts. It occurred that these women are characterized by: low sense of self-appeal, avoidant-attachment style, submissional strategies of self-presentation and emotional-oriented style of coping. The results suggest that women's excessive adapting to weak and helpless femininity does not lie at the bottom of the lack

of skills in dealing with critical situations in everyday life. Hyperfemininity may be the risk factor of an attempt at suicide.

The first of two chapters by Anna Brytek-Matera ponders upon the stereotype of femininity in the context of women's common aspirations to possess an ideal body shape. The author's own researches comparing young anorexia and bulimia patients are presented. She points out similarities and differences in the field of: actual self, ideal self, and ought self. It occurs that ideal self is higher in patients with bulimia than those with anorexia, while ought self is higher in anorexic patients. Analyses and considerations are based on the concepts of body attitudes, body image self-discrepancy, and negative thoughts and feelings about one's body. In Chapter Seven, the author examines the stereotype of masculinity. Ideal standards of men's body are discussed. It is observed that they deal with the strength and body musculature. An ideal "hypermale" and "muscularity-power-schema" present in our culture are described. The author also presents men's body image dissatisfaction, drive for muscularity and its consequences for health.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, Elżbieta Turska takes up the topic of the femininity and masculinity category in the professional life from the point of view of competencies possessed by women and men. The author presents her own researches on similarities and differences between mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, fathers and sons, in the range of such traits as: hope for success, optimism, locus of control, openness, motivation of achievements and a career effectiveness.

This monograph will hopefully enable its readers to perceive the presence of the feminine and masculine stereotypes in everyday life more reflectively, and also to see the gendered context in the gendered world. I would like the content presented in this book to become an encouragement to widen thinking on the phenomena of masculinity and femininity.

Eugenia Mandal